

Making Room for Moral Questions in the Classroom

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By Katherine Simon

In one of my first years of high school teaching, I asked my students to memorize and recite some lines from Macbeth, which we were studying. On the day the memorization assignment was due, one of the students called out the following lines from her seat:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.*

I then did what I understood to be my job as an English teacher: I helped the students understand the definitions of the words "struts," "frets," and "signifying." I asked them to comment on the central metaphor, in which "life" is compared to an actor. We pounded out the rhythm of the lines on our desks, noting that the first, fourth, and fifth lines do not fall neatly into iambic pentameter and discussing why Shakespeare might have departed from his norm for these lines. We had a passably interesting discussion about the meter and the words.

Neither I nor my students, however, thought to discuss the heart of the passage, the real questions being raised here: What are we to make of human pain and suffering? What meaning does life have? I knew that English teachers were supposed to teach about figures of speech and vocabulary, and I knew how to do that. I was neither equipped nor expected to explore what it means to be human. And so our discussion stayed safely out of the realm of meaning and morality. Focusing on the play's external structures rather than on its existential core, I unfortunately ignored the very elements of the play that I myself find most important and exciting and that I believe might have held most interest for my students.

The approach that I took to teaching Macbeth - "teaching" the technical aspects of the subject rather than exploring its significance for me and my students - is all too familiar to anyone who has spent time in middle and high school classes. What John Goodlad reported over a decade ago remains true: the preponderance of classroom activity involves "listening, reading textbooks, completing workbooks and worksheets, and taking quizzes" - not discussing important issues. Across the curriculum, students are graded on "the recall and feedback of memorized information - multiple choice, true or false, matching like things, and filling in the missing words or phrases."

As we attempt to make sense of and respond to the tragedies of September 11, the war in Afghanistan, the anthrax attacks, and the threat of continued terrorism we see more clearly how much we value the ability to think deeply about moral and existential questions. We see more clearly the importance of our children having the tools to grapple

with the questions that occupy us now - and that have always formed the core of the subject matters we teach. But though we cherish the ability to deliberate thoughtfully, most teachers, myself included, have not conceived of our role as "facilitators of explorations of moral and existential questions."

We have not seen ourselves in this way partly because it is not immediately obvious that big, morally-charged questions do form the core of the subjects we teach. Indeed, much of the context of schooling promotes the idea that school subjects are essentially lists of things-to-know. As Arthur Applebee asserts in his critique of the current curriculum, curriculum planning usually begins "with an inventory of important skills and concepts." In this model, teachers must be deliverers of information, focused on "covering" material, focused on particular facts and skills. In the past few years, teachers have been pressed to deliver the information ever more quickly and efficiently, to help students pass ubiquitous and fateful standardized tests.

But if it is true, as so many have said, that everything is different now, then let us use this moment to reflect on what constitutes a meaningful education, on what it means to be an educated person. The truth is that the most important intellectual and moral achievements require the development of habits of mind - such as empathizing with people whose experience differs from our own, seeking out multiple strategies to resolve conflict, the ability to collaborate, knowing where to find more information, asking original questions, reflecting on and learning from experience, reflecting on the purpose of our brief lives - which are not fostered by the rush to cover the contents of our textbooks and syllabuses.

We need not continue to conceive of our curriculum as a long list and of the role of teachers as the couriers of the list. Applebee suggests conceiving of curriculum as conversation; Dewey urged us to connect the record of humanity's great inquiries - the curriculum -- to the curiosities of the child. I would put our challenge this way: For every subject we teach, we must continually search for how it matters in our lives, how it links to the questions of morality and meaning that students, like all human beings, perennially ask. Many of these perennial questions are the same questions of morality and meaning that have taken on special poignancy and urgency in these grief-filled days, and these are the questions which should frame and guide our curriculum and class discussions. As horrific and shocking as the events of September 11 were, the questions they raise are the questions that we should always have been exploring as a part of education for a democracy. As justified and inevitable as the American response seems to many, it too, raises questions that all American citizens should explore in depth as part of their education.

I am not making an argument in favor of relevance over content knowledge, nor about merely providing room for students to express their feelings and opinions about these events - as important as that is. I am arguing that we have operated in schools under the illusion that we can separate out neutral, academic, intellectual content from controversial, complex, morally-charged questions about life. And this separation doesn't work - it undercuts the intellectual life of schools even as it leaves us ill-equipped to deliberate about moral issues.

Educators have spent so much time in recent years working on curriculum standards, in many cases laboring over exactly which topics are worthy of being covered by everyone. Certainly, in the textbooks written from now on, the attacks of September 11 will be included. But if they are taught as most of our history is taught, students of the future will memorize the date, the number of people who died, the names of the attackers, and perhaps the name of the president in office in 2001.

Now, when things don't seem as certain as they once did, we have an opportunity to create a different kind of curriculum - built around questions -- that would simultaneously promote rigorous intellectual work and the ability to grapple with moral issues. Questions like these could frame our curriculum: Is killing justified when the killer believes he/she is pursuing a higher good? What's the difference between "war" and "terrorism"? What is race and how does it matter in our society and in the world? What are the tensions between freedom and security? Are there scientific advances that are simply too dangerous for us as a society to pursue? How can I personally contribute to the well-being of my society and the world? Investigations of such questions might include very wide-ranging content, from history, literature, philosophy, and science.

Whatever the particular sets of content studied under such overarching questions, these explorations would demand careful garnering of evidence and would provide practice in its interpretation. They would help students come to see the difference between having an opinion and having an informed opinion -- and the difference between learning history, literature, and science and learning from history, literature and science. We have an opportunity to think about all of our teaching - far beyond conversations about the current crisis - as the way in which our society helps young people deepen their understanding of themselves as human beings and develops their capacity for moral deliberation and action.

Using what Ted Sizer has called "essential questions" to frame courses is not a new idea. But what seems more clear than ever is that the questions essential to an understanding of the subjects we teach are largely moral and existential questions. This means that teachers must be ready and willing to delve into moral matters, far more than I was when I taught *Macbeth*. A brief story highlights the point:

In a ninth grade English class I visited, the students were studying Elie Wiesel's *Night*, a memoir of the author's experience in a Nazi concentration camp. A student, Gary, raised his hand to ask, "How can Wiesel still believe? How is it possible for anyone to believe in God after the Holocaust?" The teacher told him that it was a very important question - and he should bring it up with his clergyperson. The teacher went on to point out symbolism in Wiesel's work. The class had a few minutes at the end of the period to continue reading.

The emphasis in this literature class was clearly on recognizing and being able to name themes from the text, not on grappling personally with those themes. The teacher did not see it as her role to discuss in a more personal way Gary's and Wiesel's implied questions--why do human beings hurt and kill one another? what does this imply about God? what does it mean for me, as I witness cruelty and suffering? what does it mean for me as I grapple with understanding my own connection, if any, with my "enemies" and

with God? English class has been the forum for analyzing literature, not for examining one's own beliefs.

Teachers are not clergy people - they neither have special training nor generally consider themselves experts in the problem of suffering in the world or in other moral questions. It is not surprising that teachers would be reluctant to tread this ground - especially in the public sphere, and especially when there are tests to prepare for. But if we care about supporting students to use their minds well, we must face the irony of avoiding hard questions and sticking only to the facts at school. Our task is to find a way to conceive of the subject areas so that teachers--in their capacity as thinking, feeling human beings with a love and understanding of their disciplines--could feel comfortable engaging themselves and their students in these questions. It's a moment for us to get more serious about what education means. We all - teachers, students, citizens -- want to understand this wrenching, frightening, beautiful, awe-inspiring world. School could be a place where, wrestling with questions that matter, we begin to make sense of our lives.

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Confronting the Moral Questions Within Academic Disciplines

Across the disciplines, teachers tend to quickly dismiss politically and morally charged topics when they arise. But how can we promote critical thinking if we are shy about tackling our critical issues?

How can teachers help high school students explore moral and ethical questions with the thoughtfulness necessary for a democratic society to function fully? How can they build academic courses and a school-wide culture around questions that really matter, that push

students to consider what it means to live a good, meaningful life, to promote justice, or to contribute to the well-being of society?

In this climate of "covering the content," it isn't easy, says CES Director of Research and Professional Development Kathy Simon, so, with funding from the Shinnyo En Foundation, the Coalition has launched a new national project to foster that process. The "Essential Moral Questions" project will work with Essential school teachers to devise academic curricula that pay close attention to both the intellectual and the moral elements of these subject areas. It will help them develop discussion-leading skills to address such questions, and to foster a school culture that promotes in-depth discussion of important moral issues.

"As a nation, the culture of our classrooms is particularly adverse to serious exploration of moral issues" indeed, of anything potentially controversial or not easily tested," says Simon, whose research at Stanford University explored this subject. Almost all classroom conversation between teachers and students, research shows, involves the transmission and recitation of names, dates, and formulae; across the disciplines, teachers tend to quickly dismiss politically or morally charged topics when they arise. Even important moral and ethical concepts like "equity," "freedom," and "civic responsibility," Simon observes, are likely to be taught by delivering definitions, memorizing specific texts, drilling in the structures and formulae, and the like. And such topics as slavery, the "American dream," civil rights, immigration, crime and punishment, and organized labor are most often approached as chunks of information to be ingested, not living, complex questions to be explored.

When controversial topics do occasionally arise, Simon says, they are typically debated in ways that drive students into polarized positions, with little opportunity to come to understand or respect the opinions of their classmates. "Most students graduate from high school," she says, "with little or no practice in thinking carefully, compassionately, or creatively about the key moral issues with which our society continues to grapple."

For example, teachers can open up academic discourse on moral questions like these, which require students to use substantive evidence to form and discuss their opinions:

- How should a society distribute its wealth?
- What, if anything, constitutes a just war?
- Who, if anyone, is an "outsider" in American society? How do the experiences of an outsider differ from those of an insider?
- What forces give rise to cruelty among human beings?
- How has race mattered, and how does it matter, in America?
- What does it mean to be a "criminal"? Has this definition varied from society to society? What is society's role in dealing with criminals?
- What scientific or technological discoveries have had important impact on the social world? Why and how?
- Are there scientific discoveries that we simply should not pursue?
- Is the natural world, by definition, good? Or is it morally neutral? Which sorts of changes in the natural world, if any, are appropriate for human beings to make?

Even when teachers do design curriculum around questions with moral content, the pedagogy remains very difficult. How does one conduct responsible, probing discussions around controversial issues in the public school context? How does one discuss topics about which there may be strong disagreement, yet honor the diverse perspectives held by students, their families, and the wider community? Most teachers find it easier, research shows, simply to refrain from talking in depth about controversial topics” a practice that may hamper students' moral and intellectual development. As Columbia University education professor Nel Noddings observes, schools cannot hope to promote critical thinking if they are shy about tackling critical” and often controversial” issues.

As CES commits itself to democracy and equity in its new Tenth Common Principle, new moral questions present themselves. What does it mean to "model democratic practices"? Is democracy a particular form of government, a style of discussion, a way of behaving day to day? What does it mean to "challenge all forms of inequity"? Does this require people in the school to take certain kinds of political actions? Is it ever possible that the demands of democracy and the demands of equity could be in conflict? Not just classrooms but whole school communities, Simon urges, must learn to discuss such morally charged issues.